

Peak Christmas

It was lunchtime on December 25th, 2032, and the family was enjoying a thick soup with bread. Parents Michael and Sally sat with their son Jack and younger daughter Zoe, enjoying the cosy atmosphere and comforting, nutritious food.

Afterwards Jack and Zoe went up to their rooms to video chat with friends while Sally and Michael sat in the front room, relaxing. While Michael dozed, Sally began to think about how things had changed in the previous 15 years. The modern way was to celebrate Yuletide over a period of several days, enjoying rest, warmth, and being with people to relax and bond. Her personal preference was to start on the Winter Solstice and finish after twelve days on the first day of the new year.

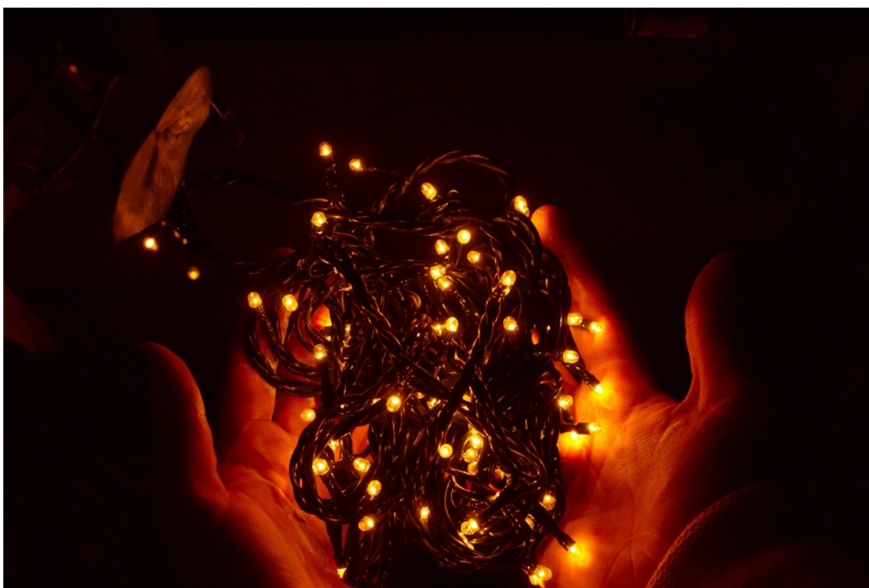
Compared to 15 years ago, this was a doddle, with hardly any extra effort needed, giving most people a real holiday from work. There was no need to fight through crowds

to buy gifts and mountains of food and drink. Yuletide was a period of relaxation, not a two-day blowout of hectic consumption and excess followed by a very late night for the new year a few days later. The modern way was to buy stuff when you needed it, not when the calendar and advertisers told you to shop.

Although decorations were still put up they were restrained and economical – a single strand of red LED lights perhaps. Home lighting was attractive enough all year round. Hardly anyone bothered with a cut pine tree, instead preferring to decorate a living tree in a pot, brought in from outside for Yuletide, or do without.

In a country where most people had everything they really needed and did not want the problems of storing, maintaining, and disposing of extra stuff, gifts were much reduced, usually consisting of small food items. Wrapping was minimal, with most items presented in reusable bags. Another popular gift was labour – helping a friend or family member with some task

This was definitely an easier, better life, thought Sally. And, while this simpler approach to the winter festival was only one aspect of a much changed way of life for British people, it had also been the crucial trigger for that wider change. It all went back to Christmas 2020 and the great Christmas Storm. Looking back,



Christmas 2020 was Peak Christmas, the highest point of mindless consumption and self-imposed stress.

Christmas 2020

That year had been the most frantic, most extravagant Christmas ever. The supermarkets had been full to overflowing (literally overflowing into the car parks) with the largest mountains of plastic tubs of chocolate ever. From honey roasted chestnuts to whisky glazed carrots, it had been almost impossible to buy vegetables or meat that had not been pre-prepared and slathered with honey, mustard, booze, butter, cream, herbs, spices, and salt.

It seemed the whole of South East England was illuminated by millions of lines of Christmas lights, with every bush, wall, and window frame decorated with lines of lights in different colours and shapes, rippling, flashing, and twinkling.

How typical of that time that an efficient technology, the LED, had become another way to express excess. It reminded Sally of the way electric and hybrid cars had so often been SUVs, larger than necessary, a sad subversion of resource efficiency. Today it seemed so obvious but at the time, she had to admit, it was rare to confront the reality of those wasteful, impulsive lifestyles.

But then, on Christmas day itself, there had been a storm that began with frightening, powerful wind, stronger than any in living memory. Lives were lost to falling trees and road accidents, but the tragedy that drew most attention was the life-sized Santa sleigh with fibreglass reindeer that had been ripped from a rooftop in Derby and thrown 50 metres onto the nearby pub. It crashed into twenty-seven crates of spirits, leading to a fire that ignited a store of fireworks that destroyed the building and killed five people inside. Reporters asked why the sleigh had not been attached more firmly and blamed the local council and the government. Others began to wonder why anybody would want to put a full-sized sleigh complete with plastic

Santa and reindeer on their roof, and why it was necessary to store such an arsenal of fireworks.

In another incident an old woman was strangled by a line of Christmas lights blown from a tree.

The Long Lock In

These initial incidents were shocking but few saw their significance. What happened next had more impact. As the winds subsided snow began to fall and by the next morning



most of the UK was covered in snow, sometimes a metre deep, even over parts of London. The weather stayed cold and most people spent the next two weeks at home, keeping warm, and existing on the left-overs of their Christmas dinners and the contents of their fridges.

By mid-January the snow had thawed and people went back to their normal lives. Apart from the many fallen trees and some damage to buildings it seemed that little had changed, but in early December 2021 retailers began to notice something was different. News reporters panicked that the economy was in trouble because the expected pre-Christmas shopping build-up was late.

Economic woes had been the favourite theme for news media as the UK inched out of the European Union. Theoretically, the UK had the advantage of being free to do what it wanted but in practice the UK government was clueless and ineffectual. At the same time concern over the US government's debts had been growing, with many predicting that

those debts would never, ever be paid back. Markets trembled and BBC reporters put on worried faces and asked what this meant for the Prime Minister.

But in reality the drop in pre-Christmas shopping intensity had nothing to do with these factors. A survey revealed that people actually preferred a cosy week at home eating soup made with left-overs to the usual Christmas blowout. More practically, they were focusing on stocking their cupboards for another snowy winter, not for the biggest turkey dinner yet. Christmas had peaked.

The Everyone Party

Another crucial change during 2021 was the emergence of a completely new and different political movement in the UK. Known as the Everyone Party, this movement did not fall on the familiar spectrum of politics. It was not left, or right, or centre. Its policies seemed a mix of both and yet were focused on ideas not previously considered important.

Everyone's policies stressed the moral importance of every individual's behaviour, explaining how each person's choices had consequences for them and others. And yet the party was also skilled in using material incentives. There was compassion with self-interest and realism.

Their politicians explained simply how resources, including human labour, were mostly limited. So, if one person used more than they really needed, then that meant there was less for other people. Living without waste was a moral imperative for citizens of a good society. At the same time, they helped people see how reducing useless consumption led to an easier, simpler life.

For example, while sympathising with the victims of the Derby Sleigh tragedy, they pointed out that many more people that day died from alcohol related incidents and more still from other effects of over-indulgent lifestyles. Telling jokes, playing games, and dancing were safer ways to enjoy the mid-winter festival.

Truths like this that, a few years earlier, would have been savagely attacked as puritanical, as dangerous to the economy, or as state meddling, were widely welcomed.

Everyone also advocated tax changes that would encourage good shifts in behaviour. The old idea that a growing economy was a good economy was replaced with the idea that a good economy was one that focused on doing just what was needed and not wasting effort and other resources on anything else.

In 2022 the coalition government of the day called an election, responding to the continuing struggle to establish a post-Brexit position for the UK and worries about the UK government's debt prompted by the sudden, worldwide conclusion that the US government would never repay its colossal debts. The Everyone Party gained an overall majority and the United Kingdom had a new Prime Minister and a new direction.

Faced with impending economic crisis and helped by the party's clever implementation strategies, taxes began to shift from penalising earning, saving, and leaving money to your children and towards penalising frivolous consumption. In addition, tax rates for money earned by work gradually became significantly lower than tax rates for money made by speculation. Rich people could still get richer by just buying shares, gold, or lending money, but the gains were much less.

This combination of material incentives with moral teaching, helped by the lessons learned by many from the Christmas of 2020, led to a shift in lifestyles in the UK. Against all expectations, rampant consumption growth stopped and people increasingly sought an easier, more relaxed, more sustainable lifestyle, with work shared more equally and fairly.

The City

Dozing at his end of the sofa, Michael was having a confused dream about a day at his office. He woke just as his boss was about to throw a spreadsheet out of the 14th floor window – as if the image on a screen can be thrown without throwing the screen – and took a moment to return to reality.

Michael's job in the City of London had been changed significantly by the social and political changes of the past 15 years. The Everyone Party's policies had made it much harder to make money just by having money.



Tax on unearned income was high, prompting City companies to look again at their activities. The most common change had been to switch from analysing companies and markets to decide what securities to buy and which to sell, and instead do the analysis to advise the companies themselves on what products and services to provide, and how. This had happened to Michael.

It was harder work and mistakes were more visible, but at least it was a useful contribution to society. In this age that mattered, even in the City. The change had been a hard one for Michael, but at least his son Jack had a clearer understanding of these matters from the start of his career.

Upstairs

Upstairs Jack was laughing with his friends, enjoying some top quality banter. Most had January exams to revise for, but you can't study all day.

Two of his friends were on his Home Engineering course at university. It was a tough course, involving a lot of practical, physical skills and work as well as a huge intellectual challenge. It was similar in difficulty to becoming a doctor and a more modern alternative to architecture. The social status of working in construction had soared in the last decade as regenerating housing emerged as one of the UK's two biggest challenges. As a rough guide, any building with chimneys was a problem and there were many of those.

Being a home engineer was similar in status to being a doctor, and far above roles like lawyer and accountant. The pay and tax rates were excellent too, and the courses were heavily subsidised.

Jack had in mind a career in sustainable home systems design and installation. This

kind of vocational qualification for intellectual high flyers like Jack would have made no sense 30 years ago, but in a country and an age where the value of work was understood it was typical.

You could still take a degree in Social History or Media Studies but there were no subsidies for them and few people today wanted to take on a huge debt paying for studies that led to no useful qualification or skill.

The decision expert

In the next room his younger sister, Zoe, was also bonding with her close friends. As a 15 year old, she had grown up with an education system dedicated to teaching her things she might actually need to know rather than just what teachers had always taught in the past.

The sound and picture on their video chat were excellent and Zoe knew the reliability and costs of their information services were also the best combination available to meet the needs of her family. She had helped her father select the services as revision for her exams next year. Decision-making in situations with multiple stakeholders and interests was something she had been taught since primary school and came naturally. Her dad still could not get used to how quickly and skilfully she organized the information, and how confidently she had directed their research of the options.

'It's just utility!' she had told him. Dad had been all set to buy the system with the sleek black boxes and cool advertisements, but Zoe knew which numbers were the important ones on the advertisements and how to plug them into her evaluation. Her selection was 22% cheaper in money terms thanks to end-to-end energy use that was 34% less than dad's favourite.

Despite his defeat, her dad had been supportive and impressed by her contribution and skills. He kept saying how different school was to when he was young.

In fact, although he didn't mention this to Zoe, what Michael had found hardest to believe was that change had happened at all. When the government announced its intentions everyone thought the idea would be resisted strongly by teachers and their unions.

Sally, as a secondary school teacher, knew well why this long overdue change had happened with such surprising ease.

What you need to know

In her career teaching mathematics, students had often asked Sally why they had to learn stuff they would never need to know after school. Sometimes they were just reaching for an excuse to avoid effort, but many times she had privately acknowledged that the students were in the right. She was trying to teach them knowledge with no practical use when there were many, far more important things she could have been explaining to them.

It was the educational elephant in the room. A really big elephant.

When it was first proposed that no child should be forced to learn something that had no practical use in adult life, part of her liked the idea immediately even though it sounded like it would involve a lot of disruption, risk, and work for her.

When she started teaching, the textbooks were strewn with bizarre questions that would never need answering in the real world. "If Alice is twice as old as Bob was three years ago and their cat is half as old as Bob will be two years from now and will be 10 years old in four years, how old is Alice?" A bored 12 year old had replied "Why don't you just tell us how old she is, cos' obviously you know?"¹

When it was further proposed that the change would be made gradually, with big chunks of the existing syllabus dropped to make time for teachers to learn the new

material, learn to teach it, and prepare lessons, she began to take real interest.

Now her students learned to make realistic decisions, ranging from taking advantage of special offers in restaurants to evaluating the many impacts of an activity to decide which approach was most sustainable. Alice, Bob, and the cat were gone and instead questions more often started with something like "If it takes 5 photovoltaic panels to..."

It was true that students were less skilled with calculus, could not model collisions between inelastic bodies gliding on smooth tables, and were hopeless with most old-style recreational maths puzzles. But give them a real decision and they knew what to do. They could also use widely available software to solve problems.

Not all teachers had been as enthusiastic. Teachers of English and history had taken longer to come around but innovations and generous allowances of time had transformed most of them into teachers of text analysis and communication skills. The rule was that students should not be *forced* to study material with no practical use but they could *choose* to do so, and that meant that at least some English teachers could still earn a living from Shakespeare and William Golding. Others retired and a few found jobs in the entertainment industries.

At the other extreme, teachers of modern foreign languages were almost unaffected.

Students today knew basic law, tax rules, and how to vote. They understood far better how to take care of their health and were taught how to follow medical instructions such as 'on an empty stomach' and 'three times daily'. They knew some practical medicine and anatomy to help them decide better when they needed medical help and when they had nothing to worry about.

Although their knowledge of science was slightly worse than in the past their knowledge of technology was far greater. They knew how things worked and how they were made. That gave students more respect for the people who had solved the many problems needed to produce the simple things on which life depends.

¹ Alice is 14 years old, by simple algebra or even more simply by asking.

They understood economics and sustainability, and knew how their personal choices would affect others. They knew that a person who drops litter commits an offence against society not just because it is against the law but because it makes unnecessary work for someone else. They could tell the difference in value between a job that helps, like giving medical care, and a job that does not, such as running a casino or a bar.



Governments around the world were taking notice and already UK schools and universities were turning out some of the most employable people in the world.

An old habit

Michael, at his end of the sofa, had a thought he had from time to time: I want a drink. The habit of drinking alcohol had been declining in the UK for many years before the government and public sentiment began to refocus on the problem of booze. Michael knew that he had no way to justify boozing. It was bad for him and for society and it was only a question of how it could be reduced. Still, a beer would be nice.

The problem was that beer and other alcoholic drinks could only be sold in plain bottles covered with health warnings and gruesome pictures of disease and car crash

injuries. When Michael was a kid, alcohol was a symbol of having a good time, Champagne was an obligatory part of celebrations, and being knowledgeable about wine was a good thing. Today, in 2032, those horrible bottles just said 'loser'.

Sally did not like them in the house and last year Zoe had insisted that Michael stop drinking completely. Part of him, the mildly addicted part, resented this but at the same time he was grateful to be pressured into better habits.

'Hot drink darling?' asked Sally. Michael smiled back at her and said 'Good idea. I'll put the kettle on.'